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UNCLAS ABIDJAN 000944

SIPDIS

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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: COTE D'IVOIRE: CLOSED PRIVATE SCHOOLS, WORRIED STUDENTS

1. (SBU) SUMMARY. Since May 17 the owners of secondary- and university-level private schools have kept their institutions closed in protest over nonpayment of government subsidies. According to the owners, the government owes them a total of USD 37 million for the years 2003 through 2005. On June 7 there was a demonstration of approximately 300 private high school students in front of the Municipal Building to demand the reopening of the schools. The government will likely feel mounting pressure from the growing number of its own people to whom it is failing to meet its obligations. END SUMMARY.

2. (U) In the 1990s, because the public school system infrastructure could not meet enrollment demand, the government enlisted the help of private schools. Students who cannot find space at the public schools can enroll in private schools, with the government subsidizing their tuition. The government subsidizes about 75 percent of an authorized student's tuition. Depending on the course of study, tuition can range from USD 400 to USD 1200 per year.

3. (U) There are over 100 private schools, high school-through university-level, located in large city centers such as Abidjan and Yamoussoukro. There are about 50,000 students in the private school system with subsidized tuition.

4. (U) According to the private school owners at the start of the closures, the government owed a total of USD 44 million:

- USD 8 million for arrears from 2003.
- USD 16 million for returning authorized students in 2004-2005.
- USD 20 million for new authorized students in 2005.

5. (U) The Public Treasury says it has no records of these amounts owed, but is waiting for direction from the Ministry of Higher Education. The Minister of Higher Education, Fofana Zemogo, met with the owners on May 26 and granted USD seven million towards the owners' claims, bringing the totaled owed down to USD 37 million. However, the owners say the minimum they will accept to reopen their schools is USD 24 million.

7. (U) Today, June 7, three weeks after the private schools closed, 300 private high school students staged a non-violent demonstration in front of the Cite Administrative (Municipal Building), protesting the continued closure of the schools and demanding to meet with the Minister of Higher Education. For the students, if schools do not reopen in time to hold final exams, they will not be able to move up to the next grade this fall. There may be more of these student demonstrations if the situation remains unresolved. (NOTE: It is unlikely that final exams will be cancelled, but they could be postponed for a few months.)

8. (SBU) COMMENT. The threat of cancelled final exams gives the private school owners a strong bargaining chip in negotiating with the government. However, it may not be enough leverage to get the government to pay the full amount claimed. The government is behind on its payments to many parties, from teachers to police to the World Bank. Arrears to the private schools, going back as far as 2003, are another sign of the serious, continuing deterioration in the government's finances. Neglecting education and public safety while agreeing to make generous pension payments to retired government officials is also a sign of how misplaced the government's priorities are. Over the next few months, as election day draws nearer, the government is likely to feel mounting pressure from the growing number of its own people to whom it is failing to meet its obligations -- students, teachers, private school owners, police officers, soldiers, and civil servants. END COMMENT.

HOOKS